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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a project in Scotland that investigated what factors were perceived by adult, university students as helpful or detrimental to their language learning. Questionnaires were completed by a sample of 120 modern language students of French, German, Italian, and Spanish language speakers. In-depth interviews, focusing on homework, teaching, and group learning and based on the questionnaire, were conducted with a much smaller sample of 20 students. Respondents seemed highly positive about their classes, especially the friendly atmosphere and use of homework. Most felt that the teacher knew what was best, that the classroom should be "teacher-centered," and that homework was a good learning tool. Comments usually told more about the students themselves than about their perceptions of their own learning abilities. Most preferred learning with other students, while classroom pace was seen as impossible to define due to the lack of definition of the "average" student. The classroom situation was seen as a social situation, although few students associated with classmates outside of class; most kept the learning versus the social aspects of the class as separate entities. Negative comments referred to earlier learning, especially school learning. Appendixes include the questionnaire, the skeleton interview script, and summary listings of helpful and detrimental factors for learning. (Contains 12 references.) (NAV)

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Learners' Perceptions of Factors Affecting Their Language Learning

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LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS AFFECTING THEIR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Giulia Dawson, Elisabeth McCulloch and Stella Peyronel (IALS)

Abstract

This paper describes a project what sought to investigate what factors are perceived by students as helpful or detrimental to their language learning. Questionnaires were used to collect data from a sample of Modern Language students at the Institute for Applied Language Studies (IALS). In-depth interviews, which focused on the three main factors mentioned in the questionnaires (homework, teaching and learning in a group), were conducted with a much smaller sample. Respondents seemed highly positive about their present classes, especially friendly atmosphere and use of homework, and generally felt that 'teacher knows best'. Negative comments appeared to refer to earlier learning, especially at school.

1. Background

For some years, the authors have worked as teachers, Course Directors and materials writers on the Modern Language Community Courses at the Institute for Applied Language Studies. These are open courses, at all levels, usually two hours per week. The approach to teaching and course/materials design is partly shaped by the general IALS approach and "house style", partly by what each Course Director perceives as appropriate and necessary for the language section. The latter can vary fairly considerably, given the size and history of each section, the prevalence of the language in British school curricula, and the degree of linguistic and cultural "remoteness" of the language to British learners.

Course Directors (and other teachers) get a fair amount of valuable informal feedback from students. On the regular end-of-term questionnaires, we get more specific feedback on course content, class activities, and materials. We felt, though, that all this still did not tell us enough about some cognitive and affective factors on the individual learners' side, such as the learning strategies they might employ, or their attitudes toward language learning (shaped by various positive and negative experiences in the past, e.g. at school). More insight into these factors would reveal more of what makes our learners tick as learners, and this could help us to help them to learn more successfully.

The original idea for this research actually arose from our concern about some typical fossilised learners, who had been studying a language at IALS for 2 or 3 years without making significant progress. As we share Beasley's and Riordan's view that 'the natural processes of evaluation and research which teachers carry out daily' should form the basis for teacher-initiated classroom research (Beasley and Riordan 1981, in Nunan 1990), we felt that an investigation into learning strategies and attitudes would help to tackle this problem. The aim of our research then broadened, taking into consideration the "average" students as well as particular cases. Under 'attitudes' we looked at learner views on certain factors seemingly external to the learning process itself, constituting what Oxford (1990) calls "input", including teacher characteristics, teaching style, methods and activities, learners' reactions to the different techniques.

Considering the above factors as part of the learning process still implies that learning strategies are of great importance. Learning strategies have been used for thousands of years before being formally and systematically studied by researchers (Oxford ibid.). Surely the learners themselves know best what helps them learning. Therefore focussing our attention on the learners seemed the right approach. Wenden and Rubin (1987:3) comment: '[previous studies] do not examine the learners' perception of what they do to learn or to manage their learning. They do not seek to present the process of L2 learning from the learners' viewpoint'. Although there seems to be a common assumption that adult learners' own beliefs and theories regarding foreign language learning have a relevant role in their learning, there is very little research on the subject. Horwitz (1987) has noted that many students come to classes with various preconceived ideas about language learning, but we still do not know very much about the nature of these beliefs. Moreover, it is

usually the teacher who decides what learners will learn, in which order they will learn it and how (Ellis 1985). An investigation into the factors learners perceive as beneficial or detrimental to their language learning could be a small attempt to redress this balance.

2. Objectives

In the original proposal the title was, "Learners' Perceptions of Learning Strategies and Attitudes", with the main aim of "gaining insight into how learners, in their own perception, have learnt an L2 successfully or have failed to do so".

The following were the specific objectives:

a) to find out how learners perceive they have achieved or failed to achieve competence both in any L2 previously, and in a specific L2 during their current experience at IALS

b) to find out which areas of language learning (such as grammar, vocabulary, practising of the skills etc.) learners believe to be important and how they rate this importance both in class time and in their own individual study time outside the classroom

c) to find out what learners consider evidence for their success or lack of success in language learning both in class and in other contexts

After the analysis of the data collected in the questionnaires, we decided it would more appropriate and realistic to modify the main aim to "to gain insight into learners' perceptions of various aspects of their language learning", and to concentrate on the first of the three specific objectives only, i.e. on "finding out what learners perceive as facilitating/inhibiting factors in their language learning" (i.e. factors in the learners themselves and in the learning situation they find).

3. Procedure

The data were collected through a combination of questionnaires and interviews and/or transcribed recordings.

A questionnaire with two open-ended questions was produced, and piloted amongst summer students of various languages and then used with larger numbers in the Autumn Term. (See Appendix 1).

In question 1, the students were not asked to distinguish between IALS and pre-IALS learning experiences - in fact, we found that most respondents referred to their experience at IALS. Although we had hoped to gain some insight into the difference between their current and previous language learning, we wanted to avoid a leading question hinting at a "before" and "after" effect. But in fact some of the pre-IALS learning experiences students did refer to were experiences at school, most of them unpleasant. We had also expected that in talking about helping and hindering factors students would refer in some way to their learning strategies, but there was no mention of them.

In question 2, which was very open, we found that the respondents were reporting on success/lack of success in a mixture of classroom and real life situations, not real-life situations only, as we had expected.

Considering how interesting the comments on the pilot questionnaire had been, it seemed worthwhile to go ahead and distribute the same questionnaire to larger numbers of students in Term 1, October 1993. We got responses from about 120 students, of Italian (38) and German (36) and also Spanish (31) and French (15). Most of them offered praise, ranging from whole-hearted to faint, quite a few of them offering constructive suggestions/criticism and also some remarks about their personal circumstances.

The responses probably said more about the students' perceptions of themselves being taught than about their perceptions of their own learning. Also, the vast majority of comments were concerned with the affective side of the learning experience rather than with the cognitive or skills side. The importance of this

side is probably often undervalued, especially with adult learners. As Oxford emphasises (1990: 140) '[the affective domain] spreads out like a fine-spun net, encompassing such concepts as self-esteem, attitudes, motivation, anxiety, culture-shock, inhibition, risk-taking and tolerance for ambiguity. The affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure.'

We organised the data from the questionnaires into categories and subcategories (see Appendix 2.1, 2.2), and noted how frequently these points had been mentioned.

Several factors, interestingly enough, were mentioned as helping as well as hindering, e.g. almost exclusive use of target language in class, pair/group work, learning in a group, choice of topics, correction, artificiality of the classroom situation.

Out of the categories derived from the questionnaires, a grid for the interviews emerged: the questions would refer to the most frequently mentioned factors and also to others that we thought potentially interesting (see Appendix 3). The grid provided us with a semi-structured frame which we believed would leave the interviewees with more control over the course of the interview. This, as Nunan (1992) points out, would also increase the degree of flexibility for the interviewers. The grid was to be filled in during and immediately after the interview, and each interview was to be tape-recorded for reference later on and as a source for quotations.

We had taught or were teaching most of the interviewees at some point in the past or at the time of the interviews but were now talking to them as researchers - this meant that we appeared to the interviewees in a double role. As Littlejohn (1993) suggests: 'Try to define exactly how the respondents see you, the researcher, and what it is that you are up to' and '[think] about how this might affect what the respondent says'. In our case, we anticipated that some respondents would be cautious in answering the questions about teaching.

Between the three of us, we conducted and tape-recorded 20 interviews with students of Italian and German at various levels, all with English as first language. All had previously filled in a questionnaire and indicated that they were happy to be interviewed. The actual selection of interviewees was based partly on particularly interesting responses in the questionnaires which seemed worth following up, and partly on the availability of students. The sample of 20 was fairly representative of the Institute's Modern Languages Students, as far as sex, age and social background are concerned (mostly professional, ages 20 to 60+). Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, plus preparation and note taking afterwards, which meant that the time spent on each interview was about one hour.

We then listened to the tapes and took notes and/or transcribed quotes in order to enter the comments into a database. We each analysed one main section of the interview. The findings will be described in the next section.

4. Findings

4.1 Homework

In the questionnaires homework was mentioned 35 times as a helping factor (and incidentally 6 times as hindering through its absence, being too mechanical or returned too late) rating among the factors with the highest score. This was somewhat surprising as, from our experience in class, the number of students regularly doing their homework did not seem to be so high. We therefore decided to include it among the topics for the interviews, hoping to gain more insights.

Do you do it regularly?

The answers to this question were overwhelmingly positive. Only one person answered "*yes, but not always the one I am given*". Asked for reasons, most students seemed to think that it was beneficial: "*it gives discipline*", " *it is a good way of learning*", "*it stops you from going back*", "*it is good for consolidation*". A quarter of the interviewees mentioned one form or another of peer pressure: "*it is embarrassing if you do*

not do it", "I did not want to be shamed", "it is necessary to keep up with the class". Several students told us that they did it because they enjoyed it *"I enjoy it, it's natural to me".* The fact that homework was set regularly was mentioned several times as *"a plus for courses at IALS".*

Should homework be used as a preparation for the next lesson?

Here the response was more mixed with a slight predominance of positive answers, particularly with regard to vocabulary: *"it could be an incentive", "it would give you something to focus on in class", "I would like to prepare a topic in advance".* Many students realised that it probably would not be very realistic: *"somebody may not do it and would not attend the class".* Many preferred homework to be used for revision and reinforcement and among the negative answers someone said: *"Demands at work do not always allow for homework to be done, we would rebel!"*

Should homework be corrected individually or collectively?

Out of 20 students, 14 replied *"both".* Several answers indicated that class correction was good as one learned from others' mistakes/answers: *"Things come out in class that would never come out if corrected individually"* or *"Repetition from class correction is good"* or *"One is forced to go over the homework and more comes out of it".* However one student admitted *"I never thought I would be so childishly pleased if someone wrote 'gut' on my homework".*

What kind of feedback would you like to get?

Most answers seemed to interpret feedback narrowly as meaning only correction, and expectations from students were quite low: most seemed to be happy with *"just correction"*; it has to be taken into account that feedback takes place formally during the class and informally at other times. *"Highlighting of persistent errors", "tips to avoid clumsiness"* were among the comments.

Does homework play a role in encouraging or discouraging you?

Answers to this question were suspiciously unanimous in their "positiveness", only one person admitting *"lots of mistakes get me down"* (comments heard in class when giving back homework are decidedly more in line with this remark). Other comments were *"errors are corrected, which does not always happen in class", "aiming at accuracy as opposed to communicating in class", "it is a vital indicator whether you are learning".* Pleasure was mentioned again: *"I quite enjoy doing it because often you discover things other than homework".*

Which kind of homework do you find more beneficial? (grammar exercises, free/guided writing, reading)

Virtually everybody stressed the need for homework to be in a written form: *"it should be written because you take more care", "anything involving writing because it reinforces and makes it stick".* The majority of the students studying Italian expressed a marked preference for free writing while none of those studying German mentioned it: this could be due to the fact that the level was generally slightly higher among the students of Italian or perhaps it is simply that emulating Goethe is perceived as too ambitious while Dante feels more within reach!

What would help you to do it more regularly or, how could it be more beneficial?

As, to our surprise, all the students interviewed had declared that they did their homework regularly, the question proved to be redundant. However, there were demands for homework to be *"more testing", "more varied and more stimulating".* Several people also expressed the need to make it *"more essential that homework is done".*

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Conclusions

Among the various institutions that offer language courses to adults in Edinburgh, IALS stands out because homework is set regularly. Nonetheless, if asked whether we thought that homework played an important role in the learning process of our students before embarking on this project, we would have probably given a negative answer with confidence. From the answers we got both from the questionnaires and the interviews it is clear that we underestimated the importance of homework for our students. Most students asked for both individual and collective correction: on the one hand students seem to need a public recognition of their efforts, on the other hand it seems to be well integrated in their learning process. Another element that emerged from this investigation is the opposition of fluency (in the class) to accuracy (for homework). Homework has to be in a written form; it is seen by all our students as something permanent to contrast with the transient oral fluency of their efforts in class. It is also a written record of progress and it provides the students with the necessary continuity between classes.

4.2 Teaching

In this analysis of the answers to the five questions concerning teaching, two general considerations need to be borne in mind. Firstly, almost all the answers in this section of the interview referred to individual teachers rather than teaching behaviour. Secondly, the answers referred to students' experience of teachers at IALS or at school. It seems that in general positive points related largely to present experience at IALS while negative ones related largely to traditional school experience.

How do you think a teacher could help you best?

Prompts given were: setting priority, feedback, correction, vitality/enthusiasm, explanations. Various answers referred to the prompts (namely correction, priorities, vitality). As far as correction is concerned, most answers referred to its importance, (which was also an evident point made about homework) with comments like "*correction is vital / correction is imperative for gauging how much we have learnt / lots of correction is good and necessary*". But some answers referred to interruptions as well: "*The teacher does not interrupt and correct at the end of your speech*".

There seemed also to be a variety of references to the importance of having a native speaker as a teacher for cultural input, particularly *"It is extremely important to learn about German mentality"*.

Two more points were made about the helpful teacher: must be interested and must not be sarcastic. These comments seemed to refer to past experiences of teachers. The word "*sarcastic*" in particular has been used later on as well to define less helpful behaviour.

Is the continuity of the teacher important?

To this question we were expecting a general agreement on "yes", given our experience of students not wanting to change their teacher year after year. What we actually found were 11 positive answers, 5 negative and 4 negative/positive.

In most cases a distinction was made according to different situations: according to level (No for Beginners / Yes for Advanced), quality of teaching, or depending on frequency of changes (same teacher for one term/year).

Why is the continuity of the teacher important ?

Various reasons given here, such as 'teacher knows students' ("*The teacher understands the mistakes you keep making and gives you advice about them "/"The teacher gets to know you and what standard you are at*"), 'students know teacher' ("*... you tune into her/his way of speaking*"), safety/confidence and 'relationship/group' ("*Classes at IALS have continuity and are bonded with the teacher. The group works better.*"), are clearly interrelated. They all refer to the group dynamics and seem to suggest a vision of the class as a friendly group of people. This is exactly what we would have expected from the questionnaires.

Some students mentioned the positive aspects of changing the teacher : *"different accents"*, *"different personality"*, *"different way of teaching"*. To these students, all difference seems to be felt as good: *"... variety of personalities and accents are nice: you are not going to speak to one person all the time!"* / *"It seems strange to learn your whole language from one person."*.

Analysing these results it looks as if there were two contrasting tendencies: on the one hand your teacher loves you and is the best you can get but, on the other hand, any changes in the way of teaching, personality and accent are welcome. In general the interviewees who were against the idea of changing teacher had stronger feelings than the ones who did not object to it.

How learner-centred do you think the lesson should be?

Prompts given were: setting the pace, interacting with students, deciding about activities. For many people the question was too specific and formulated in an unfamiliar language and therefore it was very difficult to answer. This may account for the fairly high number of people who did not answer.

The majority of students said that the class should be *"teacher centred"* and seem to think that *"the teacher knows best"*, as one of them put it. However many of the interviewees tried to justify themselves saying that they were used to old teaching styles or they were old themselves and therefore not familiar with "modern" teaching. It seems as if all of them know that "democracy in the classroom" is a popular issue, but they cannot agree with it and they almost feel guilty for that *"I am an old-fashioned type, if I come here to learn then it is the teacher that should decide."*.

Three people said that that it is *"good as it is"* and their answers seemed somehow to convey the idea that the lesson is teacher-centred. However, it is interesting that one student mentioned that it should be *"class centred"*. Only one person suggested that the class should be a *"partnership teacher-student"*, and this seemed to be a good balance, the real "democracy".

What sort of teaching behaviour do you see as not helpful?

This question is closely related to the first of this set of questions. Some of the points mentioned by the students like *"correction"* and *"sarcastic"* had already been mentioned but, quite interestingly, not always by the same people.

We had expected here a few examples of bad teaching behaviour. These are some of the points that contribute to the picture of a bad teacher: *"A teacher that does not pay attention equally to students"*, or is *"too timid"* and *"does not tell students to shut up"*, who has *"no sense of humour"*, who is *"disorganised"* and one who is *"impatient"* or *"bored"*. And finally: *"A teacher who is deadly boring, that is the worst"*.

It must be underlined that the interviewees seemed to refer mostly to their school experience when describing their image of a non-helpful teacher. This seems to be revealed by comments such as *"a teacher who has pet students and ignores the rest"* or *"a teacher who has a plan and follows it regardless"*. The same person mentioned as well *"useless grammar* and *learning poems"*. We might be wrong, but we associate the concepts of pet students and learning poems with traditional school experiences.

Conclusions

Students seem to believe that teachers at IALS are able to plan and organise the lessons in the best possible way and seem to be happy to leave to the teacher the amount of freedom/democracy she/he wants to employ.

Most of the students seem to have a general idea about "traditional" school methods versus "modern" IALS methods. But while they seem to have strong personal ideas about "traditional" they do not elaborate on the positive aspects of "modern". Here again they seem to trust IALS teaching policy.

The attitudes regarding the continuity of the teacher show a fair amount of awareness of the gains and drawbacks of changing the teacher. Again a high degree of trust is shown here, but it seems to be more founded. Students' acceptance that changing the teacher can imply positive effects was somewhat surprising.

4.3 Learning in a group

This set of questions explored how students felt about learning in what we see as a fairly stable and relaxed group, as opposed to learning in a 1:1 situation or in naturalistic surroundings, or to learning in a group with little or no choice about it (e.g. at school!)

The first 6 items were presented to students as pairs of opposites, representing the two ends of a continuum, or the "two sides of the coin"(i.e. positive and negative sides of the same factor). Students were asked where they thought they fitted in along this continuum, or which aspect they thought more relevant.

To find out what students think about speaking to other students as a central activity in the classroom, we asked them which of the following two aspects is more relevant for them: ***Learning from each other*** or ***picking up mistakes from one another.***

Very positive comments were made overall; about 3/4 of learners stated explicitly how they profit by learning from the other students - it could mean that they increase their confidence by practising situations with classmates, or that they can practise the vital ability to *"pick up what the other person is saying"*. This was more or less what we had expected.

More surprising for us was the philosophical attitude towards mistakes. Only two students expressed worries about making mistakes: *"if too many working in a group and not enough correction"*. Most other interviewees did not seem very concerned; on the contrary, learners commented that *"you have to make mistakes in order to get used to making mistakes in real life"*, or *"even Germans do not speak perfect German!"* Several students implied that they were not so worried because they were sure that mistakes would either self-correct later on (*"you usually know when you have made a mistake"*), or that they would be corrected fairly quickly either by the teacher or by fellow-students.

Overcoming fears and inhibitions or ***too much familiarity*** were the two opposites related to learning in the set-up of a stable, friendly group.

Not very surprisingly for us, the message here is very clear: the friendlier the better, and this fits in with the findings from the previous question about learning from one another. Students commented in various ways on how the friendliness in the group helps them to *"find their feet"* initially (i.e. makes them feel sufficiently at ease to start speaking out in class), and later on helps them to contribute more or more meaningfully: *"if you get on with people, it reduces stress levels"*.

Nobody felt they had encountered excessive familiarity, although some learners speculated how too much familiarity might hinder their learning, for example they might *"slack off"* after a while as far as class attendance or homework are concerned, or show *"less commitment"* in class than they would in a *"less comfortable environment"*.

Implicitly or explicitly, most students see it as the teacher's responsibility to establish the atmosphere of friendliness initially but also to make sure it does not get excessive as time goes on.

Peer pressure to keep up or ***mutual support*** were the two opposites we asked students to think about in relation to the group making progress together.

Here the picture is very mixed: for each side of the factor looked at separately, about half of the students state that it is an important and/or helpful factor. Opinions range from the recognition that some peer pressure is necessary: *"on your own, you do not have to learn - in class, if you do not know the answers, you look foolish and it is a waste of time"* to a perhaps slightly idealised view of the class as mutually supportive

group without performance pressures: *"the class is not competitive, as each person has strengths and weaknesses"*.

On the other hand, peer pressure can be felt as rather intimidating, as this remark shows:*"I was initially terrified: I always thought that everybody else was much better than I was. Then I gradually discovered I did know quite a lot"*.

One fifth of respondents stated explicitly that both sides are necessary and important for their learning, even though the peer pressure is not always seen as altogether positive. One comment on the peer pressure side is *"I need this more negative side in order to make me do some work"*. One student said that group support is important but that *"it is difficult to maintain enthusiasm without some sort of examination"*, and for him, having to *"talk in a group every week is like an exam where you have to perform"*. Another learner summarised the importance of both aspects like this: *"Friendly rivalry is good!"*.

We were quite surprised to see how much more students' opinions divide on this point than on other points. The language used to describe the two sides is rather significant. Expressions used for the supportive (the positive) side include *"voluntary/friendly/not competative"*, whereas the peer pressure side (the more mixed or even negative side) is described as *"rivalry/performing/racing ahead/pressure/keeping up/letting down"*.

Students' personalities and conditioning seem to come in here more than with other questions. Comparing the answers from female and male respondents in detail could be rather intriguing. Or, it could be interesting to look again at each learner's specific motivation for taking the course and to relate the answer to that.

Classroom pace is usually geared to the average student.

Is this a problem for you?

Answers were very mixed - the implicit message is: who is this phantom "average student" anyway?

By linking the pace to factors like different motivations, learning speeds, group sizes, participants' ages and class levels, students seemed to be trying to define that elusive "average student". One learner commented the if the pace is not geared to the average student then *"there is something wrong"*; another asked for the virtually impossible, namely that the pace *"should be geared to everybody"*!

Three respondents each said they had felt the pace had been either too slow for them *"slow people can be a problem"* or rather brisk *"The teacher moves us on quickly because we need to be moved on quickly"*.

Only two respondents appeared not particularly concerned about fast or slow pace *"whether the topic interests me is more important"* and *"different weaknesses and strengths in different language areas even this out"*.

Is the class a social occasion for you?

This should perhaps have been put in a different way or defined more clearly, perhaps adding "... as well as an occasion for learning". Students seemed to understand social occasion here as a fixed occasion on a particular weekday when they go and meet this friendly, stable group of people who share a common aim and who have a lot of fun together.

The answers were more mixed than we would have thought and also revealed some fairly strong negative feelings - somewhat surprising since these learners did make the choice to learn in this kind of group after all.

Just under half of the respondents saw the class as a social occasion in this sense, explicitly or implicitly helpful to their learning. *"I like other people"* or *"I enjoy people ... the enjoyment helps the learning"*. One student said she has made good friends who she now regularly sees outside the class - this seems to be an exception rather than the norm, though.

On the other hand, again just under half of the learners said that this social side is not or should not be the most important factor: *"No! I am here for learning"*, *"I do not need a social fix"*, *"I can see the social bit interfering with the learning"*. Some students clearly have very much their own agenda, the determination to learn (one student calls it her *"selfish purpose"*), regardless of the dynamics in the group. Others might perhaps be reluctant to admit that the social side is important to them because they do not want to give the impression that they are short of social contacts.

Would the lack of group continuity be a problem for you?

It is worth recalling here that in Modern Languages classes, we only see our students for 2 hours a week over 9 - 12 weeks. Group continuity was understood here as a relatively stable group over at least 2 terms or the whole year.

Generally, comments centre on the theme of getting on with the group helping learning, and most students appear to value group continuity. More specifically, more than half of respondents explicitly stated why it is important and helpful, explaining that *"there is more natural conversational feeling"*, or *"you talk more freely and get away from the bland conversation, and you talk about things you might actually want to talk about"*. Other reasons given are: it is more relaxed/ less inhibited/one gets *"familiar with everybody else's learning habits and speed"*. Another reason was that too much change is unsettling: *"newcomers change the balance in the group"* and *"existing group members need to tune in to new ones"*.

But learners seemed to be well aware of possible drawbacks of a stable group over a longer period, as some of the qualified yes-answers and some of the negative comments (about a third of the respondents) showed. Students appreciated, for example, that *"newcomers to the group might feel like outsiders"* or that new/different people in the class could be more stimulating and interesting *"I need to talk to different people"*.

Other learners pointed out that although group continuity is nice, it is not so important after the beginner stage or that it is in fact not crucial to their own learning progress *"lack of group continuity would not have hindered learning progress seriously - at the age I am, I am very used to taking people as I find them and I am convinced that what I'm doing is what I want to do"*. Again, it seems that some students have a very clear idea of their own learning agenda.

Conclusions

Obviously, it was the interviewees' own choice in the first place to learn in a fairly stable and friendly group of well-motivated fellow-learners - and our expectation of many positive comments about this kind of learning set-up was certainly fulfilled.

What are the more specific messages? Firstly, even if it is stating the obvious, it is crucial that teachers should continue to establish and encourage the much-appreciated supportive friendliness and non-threatening, relaxed atmosphere which is so obviously seen as an asset at IALS courses. This is a very important point to make during the induction and development sessions for new teachers.

Secondly, in spite of this strong appreciation of the friendliness of the group, quite a few of the interviewees see the social side and the learning side quite clearly as two different factors. They seem to imply that however enjoyable the social interaction in the group might be, learning progress is more important or would happen regardless of the social side. This is a reminder perhaps for the teacher not to assume automatically that just because the group is obviously getting on very well, it means each and every individual is satisfied with their learning progress.

5. General conclusions

The questionnaires and especially the interviews give a complex, if rather impressionistic, picture of how a group of Modern Languages students see the effect of various factors on their language learning. Although the sample of interviewees was small, the picture is still valuable since the cross-section of students is fairly

representative of the typical IALS Modern Languages population. A certain amount of generalisation from these data should be possible.

The interviews were not only a means of gathering data, but turned out to be enlightening and enriching for both sides: the students welcomed the chance to reflect on and talk about their own learning (as opposed to course evaluation). Perhaps they should be given more opportunities in the future to repeat this experience.

The usefulness of the interviews could also be seen as part of a process of raising students' consciousness about teaching and learning issues, therefore improving their language learning. Rubin (1987: 16) writes: "It is assumed that making learning decisions conscious can lead both poor and better learners to [...] better learning."

The teachers/researchers, apart from seeing new aspects of the students' learning processes, were reminded of how the students might feel in the language classroom, and were given an opportunity to reflect on some aspects of teaching behaviour/style.

What are the main insights gained? Above all, a picture emerged of what is happening to these adult, usually well-educated and well-motivated students on the affective side in the language classroom and why it might be happening. There is a wide range of different feelings/attitudes from inhibition/intimidation to confidence/safety, from a more self-centred/"selfish" to a sociable/mutually supportive approach, from feeling discouraged to feeling encouraged. The individual's feelings of self-worth come in here, too, although referred to only implicitly.

Learning in a group is seen on the whole as a positive, rewarding and effective way of learning, although students have also stated fairly frankly its inevitable drawbacks and limitations.

Students seem to have an unshakeable faith in their teacher's ability to organise and direct their learning. They seem to be happy to delegate most of the decisions about their language learning to the teacher and, although our data might be affected by the students' desire to please, seem satisfied with their teacher's competence.

Homework seems to be the link between collective effort produced in the class and individual effort. Students clearly perceive this unity as important, as they consider homework as a way of checking their progress and as yet another way of learning.

6. Future developments

This study has convinced us that there are some useful practical changes to our courses that could be implemented quite easily.

Homework should be integrated even more into the syllabus. Different kinds of homework could be given, perhaps using a variety of skills and different media besides the written homework, which was widely seen as the most beneficial.

For feedback on our teaching and as an alternative to our standard end-of-course evaluation questionnaire, it might be useful to offer the opportunity for an informal talk between student and course director. Another possibility would be to introduce a Course Director's "surgery" when students can come and talk about the course in general.

On a more theoretical level, each of the three factors (homework, teaching, learning in a group) is interesting enough in its own right to deserve to be investigated further, with a larger sample of students.

Here are some possible developments:

Large samples of students could be given different types of homework and asked to evaluate them according to effectiveness, pleasure, usefulness. The resulting data could help to develop homework materials more systematically.

Further investigation into effective ways of teaching could be carried out. This could include finding out more about past language-learning experiences, but should mainly concentrate on which aspects of teaching at IALS are perceived as helpful.

The individual students' motivations could be investigated at the start and throughout the course. Changes in motivation and how these affect the attitude to group learning could be followed up.

One could investigate, perhaps by survey of a large and representative sample of the student population, aspects of the skills side and cognitive side of their learning, in order to get a clearer picture of the "mental landscape" of our learners.

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13

APPENDIX 1 *Questionnaire*

(retyped and reduced)

As teachers of Modern Languages in the Institute, we are interested in what makes learning languages easier or more difficult, and we are planning a small study on this . As a first stage, we are asking some students to answer the following questions.

1 - *What do you think have been helping or hindering influences in learning a language in a formal situation (e.g. a course)?*

helping factors

hindering factors

Can you give a few examples of situations in which you thought your language learning had been successful or unsuccessful?

success

lack of success

Thank you!

Giulia Dawson
Elisabeth McCulloch
Stella Peyronel

1.1

APPENDIX 2.1
HINDERING FACTORS

* *TL used almost exclusively in class*	instructions
	explanations
	vocab.
	audio-visual
	not in social class situations like coffee break
* *No need/pressure to communicate in TL*	
* *Class size*	too small
	too large
	increases fears/inhibitions
	limited individual attention
* *Infrequency of class*	
* *Formal learning situation does not overcome learning plateau*	
* *Bad memories of "traditional" language teaching*	
* *"Formal" teaching methods*	
* *Audio-visual materials*	poor sound quality
	too difficult
	not available for home use
	not used often enough
	poorly chosen
* *Pace*	geared to "average" student rather than individual
	to slow can mean unproductive (e.g. discussions)
	too fast
* *Lack of accompanying worksheets*	vocab. lists (with Eng)
	grammar
	in English
* *Lack of textbook*	
* *Bad textbook*	
* *Lack of exposure to / use of TL outside classroom*	
* *Not enough grammar taught*	
* *Limited speaking practice in class*	
* *Too tired too pay enough attention in evening classes*	
* *Classroom activities*	devoid of real content
	too difficult
	rules too difficult (games)
* *Topics*	not providing scope for discussion
	not very relevant
	too much time spent on one topic
	no current affairs
	not enough time spent on one topic
	random choice
* *Pair/group work*	lack of pair work
	bad partner
	errors ignored/not corrected
	less effort made
	not done at all
	group too big
* *Not enough written work/spelling*	
* *Wrong level of class*	
* *Classroom situation is artificial (Teacher understands better than natives)*	
* *Problems with correction*	not enough given
	lack of praise/positive encouragement
	too much pronunciation correction
* *Teacher is not helpful*	speaks too fast
	unsympathetic
	not encouraging use of TL at coffee break
* *Bad memory for vocabulary*	
* *Lack of course outline*	lack of opportunity to prepare for next topic
	no help given for realistic achievement targets

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- ***Homework***
  - not enough
  - returned too late
  - tasks too mechanical
- ***Learning situation in a group***
  - too much familiarity
  - not enough correct TL input
  - pressure to keep up with weekly progress of group
  - dominant individuals can create reluctance to speak
  - picking up from each others' mistakes
  - fears/inhibitions
  - not sufficiently stretched
- ***Lack of time/pressure to do work outside the classroom***
- ***Lack of choice over course content***
- ***Wide range of abilities in one class***
- ***Better students in the class have an off-puting effect***
- ***Linguistic objectives of activity not clear***
- ***Physical factors such as classroom facilities***
- ***Too much/detailed grammar***
- ***Not enough vocabulary taught***
- ***Too much emphasis on speaking***
- ***Worse students in the class have an off-puting effect***
- ***Course content***
  - no continuity
  - geared to average student
- ***Lack of teacher's continuity***
- ***Lack of fun***
- ***Lack of group continuity***
- ***Lack of testing/evaluation/assessment.***
- ***Lack of motivation***
- ***Lack of revision***
- ***Lack of controlled practice***
- ***Teacher not native speaker***

APPENDIX 2.2
HELPING FACTORS

- *Homework*
- *Similar abilities within the class*
- *Safety of the classroom situation*
- *Almost exclusive use of TL*
- *Teacher is helpful*
  - setting priorities
  - with grammar
  - with cultural questions
  - has drive/enthusiasm
  - feedback
- *Smallish group*
  - individual attention
  - pressure to participate
  - overcomes fears/inhibitions
- *Linguistic objectives clearly set out*
- *Audio-visual aids*
- *Using the TL with native speakers*
- *Relaxed/informal atmosphere*
- *Emphasis on speaking/listening*
  - rather than writing
  - rather than grammar
- *Accompanying worksheets*
- *Native speaker as T*
- *Using the language lab*
- *Correction*
  - grammar
  - pronunciation
- *Commitment to regular work by attending a class*
- *Role play*
- *Course pitched at right level*
- *Previous language learning experience*
- *Cultural input*
- *Familiarity with grammar categories/sound grammar base*
- *Exposure to/use of TL outside the classroom*
- *Varied/well-designed activities*
- *Revision/repetition*
- *Understanding grammar helps to build up the Language*
- *Relevance of topics*
  - current affairs
  - everyday situations
  - business-related
- *Learning situation in a group*
  - pair work
  - learning from each other
  - mutual support
  - fun/enthusiasm/motivation
  - overcome fears/inhibitions
  - peer pressure
  - mixed ages/backgrounds
  - social event
- *Unpredictability of classroom events*
- *Real/relevant use of Language in class*
- *Building up vocab. round a topic*
- *Phonetics*
- *Plenty of discussions*
- *Intensive course*
- *Pace*
- *Break*
- *Motivation*
- *Controlled practice*
- *Textbook*
- *Course outline*
- *Testing/exam/assessment*
- *Words written down*
- *Games*

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APPENDIX 3

Interview schedule (skeleton)

Name
Occupation
Mother tongue
Motivation for IALS course
Other languages
Details of other courses

Sex
Age
Language (studied at IALS)
How long for
Motivation

HOMEWORK

- Do you do it regularly? Y / N
- Why?
- Should homework be used as preparation for next lesson?
- Should homework cover aspects not dealt with in the classroom?
- Should it be corrected individually or collectively?
- What kind of feedback would you like to get?
- Does homework play a role in encouraging or discouraging you?
- Which kind of homework do you find more beneficial?
(grammar exercises, free/guided writing, reading)
- What would help you to do it more regularly *or*
- How could it be more beneficial?

- Do you look for other opportunities to use the language?
- Would you like to have some tapes?

TEACHING

- How do you think a teacher could help you best?
(cultural input, setting priority, feedback, correction, vitality/enthusiasm, explanations)
- Is the continuity of the teacher important? Y / N
- Why?
- How much learner centred do you think the lesson should be?
(setting the pace, interacting with students, deciding about activities)
- What sort of teaching behaviour do you see as not helpful?

LEARNING IN A GROUP

- What would your position be?
(learning from each other/picking up mistakes
overcome fears-inhibitions/too much familiarity
peer pressure to keep up/mutual support
pace geared to average students (is it a problem?)
social occasion (is it one for you?)
mixed backgrounds (do you think is positive?))
what would be the ideal percentage of pair/group work?
- Would the lack of group continuity be a problem for you?
- In which situations do you think that the drawbacks of using exclusively the target language outweigh the benefits? (time constraints, clarity, focusing)

Safety and artificiality have been mentioned about the classroom situation

- Why would you say it is safe?
- Why would you say it is artificial?